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Argentina: Junta Changes Debated

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Argentines in and out of government are actively debating the question of whether the structure of national authority should be altered; a number of substantive points on the matter have been raised in the press.

To a large extent, the debate mirrors the irrepressible tendency of the highly politicized Argentines to have their say despite government bans on political activity and discussion. There is, however, genuine concern that power should be wielded differently in succeeding phases of the "revolution." In addition, some see in the debate a chance to influence events in their own favor.

The politics of Argentina, where formal institutions even in normal circumstances play only a secondary role, are generally played out in behind-the-scenes fashion. Thus the debate is far from an irrelevant exercise, despite its lack of official sanction. Many participants are military men or have contact with influential officers.

Virtually all the current speculation presupposes the continuing existence of the three-man military junta, but it seems a foregone conclusion to most Argentines that the formal power structure will eventually be modified. Debate centers on whether the presidency should continue to be held by a member of the junta or should go to a fourth man.

Many believe that the current structure, which has worked well during the initial crisis and consolidation of the military's authority, does not give the presidency the necessary power to direct longer term policies and plans. Indeed, some commentators have opined that leaving the presidency within the junta actually worsens the potential for crippling interservice rivalries.

The particular facets of this administration that are causing concern are its perceived lack of dynamism—at times outright clumsiness—and President Videla's mild, some say indecisive, manner. To many, the junta seems to have "run out of steam." There has been no resolution of the most pressing political problem, the uncertain status of the powerful labor movement, despite frequent announcements that a new regulating law is about to be presented.

General Diaz Bessone

Moreover, the statements of cabinet members have sometimes contradicted those of other top officials or have been at variance with subsequent policy. Hundreds of complicated, confusing directives are still being sorted out and interpreted.

Because he eschews personal power and has advocated a relatively moderate line, President Videla seems to many inadequate to the task of bringing order to this situation. The conciliatory approach he believes is necessary to bring badly divided Argentines together is viewed as weakness by his detractors.

All Argentine political sectors have a strong interest in the outcome of the debate, and politicians, journalists, unionists and others are probably joining in as much to test and challenge the regime as to express real concern. The unions in particular see an opportunity to contribute to a weakening of the junta's power. Labor leaders, more than any other group, have been engaged in a test of wills with the junta and are seeking ways to demonstrate their strength.

The debate is likely to provide increasing problems for Videla, chiefly because it appears to have the backing of at least some highly placed individuals in the government. Videla thus can hardly afford to continue ignoring the situation, as he has seemingly done so far.

Within the regime, one of the men most likely to take a strong interest in effecting change is navy commander and junta member Admiral Massera. Another is Planning Minister General Diaz Bessone, who last year out-maneuvered Videla to engineer changes that gave him his cabinet post and placed him next in line for the presidency. Both are highly ambitious and apparently regard Videla as politically vulnerable.

The two will not necessarily be able easily to profit from the debate. Massera has tried in the past to unsettle the junta—and Videla. The President, for all the complaints that are heard, continues to have substantial support in and out of the military. Moreover, any alliance between Massera and Diaz Bessone will be sorely tested by the inevitable rivalry between the two power seekers.

The debate and the machinations of men like the navy chief and planning minister will not necessarily undo the President, even if that is intended. It seems clear, however, that Videla will increasingly need to be on guard lest he be caught unaware and will have to divert his attention from policy matters he wants to address as chief executive. Ironically, in attempting to protect himself from his critics, Videla may become still more vulnerable to the charge that he is ineffective. This in turn could strengthen the hand of his political rivals and lend further weight to the argument that changes in the power structure are indeed needed.

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